

Treating them carefully: Considerations for active travel schemes

Paddy Hastie (ANWA Chairperson) and Charles Robertson (ANWA Vice-Chair) share their advice on the effective treatment of active travel schemes.

With £200 million of government funding recently injected into walking and cycling schemes across England, alongside the DfT's recent appointment of Chris Boardman as permanent National Active Travel Commissioner, active travel schemes remain high on the government's agenda. And with good reason.

The proven health benefits of active travel schemes see millions of people across the country benefit from healthier local journeys via a boost to air quality and improved physical and mental health. Additionally, increases to the cost of living (particularly fuel costs) and a focus on climate change has seen the public seek more fuel-efficient methods of transport.

But with active travel more important than ever, local authorities have a responsibility to ensure getting around towns and cities on foot or by bike is an easy and attractive option all year round.

Any local authority or highways agency with segregated cycleways and pathways should have a strategy in place to treat them during the winter season. But many authorities have found a 'one size fits all approach' doesn't always extend from the treatment of roads to cycle and pathways.

Charles Robertson (Winter Service Solutions) and Paddy Hastie (Peacock Salt) share their advice on the effective treatment of active travel schemes.

“ For cycling and walking to become the natural choice for shorter journeys, people must feel safe and the options must be easy. ”

Chris Boardman



Charles Robertson
(ANWA Vice-Chair)



Paddy Hastie
(ANWA Chairperson)

Legislative requirements

Although active travel schemes form part of the highway network, authorities don't have a legal obligation to treat them if this has been stipulated in the authorities' winter service strategy, a common reason being with stretched budgets, treating the roads remains the priority.

Paddy comments:

“ The balance between economics and safety is currently a big topic of debate. And although it can be costly to properly maintain footpaths and cycleways, in doing so, Local Authorities are helping to promote Active Travel right through the year. ”

Paddy Hastie

Charles added:

“ The amendment to the Railways and Transport Safety Act in 2003 made it clear authorities had a duty to ensure safe passage along a highway is not endangered by snow or ice. Similarly, to the 2003 amendment, the industry could soon see it become a legal requirement to treat footpaths and cycleways as they grow in popularity and are used by the public throughout the entire year. ”

Charles Robertson

Treat them carefully

Before making any decisions on the most appropriate treatment methods, Paddy recommends looking at the cycleway itself. Factors including the location, if it runs through a town or village; proximity to water (as marine life needs to be considered); and if the route includes and vegetation or metal structures will all influence the vehicle and type of material used to de-ice.

The route length and any obstacles along the route (such as bollards) will also play a part in any decision making as this determines the size of vehicle and tank needed to cover the pathways.

De-icer options

The treatment of active travel schemes should not be approached the same way as roads. Unlike roads, which see a higher traffic flow, the temperature of cycleways tends to be colder. This drop in temperature is aided in many cases by vegetation which tends to grow alongside the route.

Liquid de-icers are predominantly used on active travel schemes over rock salt as the low footfall, infrequent traffic and cyclist's thin tyres cannot provide the activation salt needs to start the de-icing process.

Sodium Chloride brine is the most cost-effective liquid de-icer, however excessive use can cause corrosion on metal structures and surfaces such as cycling stands and railings. Other liquids (such as potassium acetate) treat to much lower temperatures and last longer than a salt brine, meaning less treatments are required. However, with the price of potassium acetate recently tripling, some local authorities have adopted cost saving methods such as using two different de-icer tanks on the same vehicle to treat different sections of the same route.

Vehicle options

With the surge in popularity of active travel schemes, there number of vehicle options available. Mini tractors and flatbed pick up trucks are a popular choice as they are sturdy enough to hold de-icer treatments, but nimble enough to travel down narrow pathways.

Using vehicles for precautionary treatments is one consideration, but the vehicle's ability to clear snow should also be considered. Mini ploughs are one option, as well as adding power brushes, which push snow to both sides of the pathway.

Although there is a shift to using electric vehicles in areas such as London where there are low emission zones, Charles predicts technology still has a way to go before electric vehicles are fully adopted by the winter maintenance industry until current limits with charging time and battery life are addressed to make these a viable option.

